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THE YUGOSLAV PARTISAN MOVEMENT

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Description

A summary, from recent eyewitness sources, of what is now known about the Yugoslav Partisan movement, with an attempt to evaluate it both as a military and as a political force. The Partisans are a well-organized, formidable, and effective army, amounting to 220,000 troops under the command of General Tito. They are led by Communists, but the rank and file are Yugoslav peasants of all political beliefs. They favor a free and united Yugoslavia on the broadest possible democratic basis, and make a successful appeal to all religious and national groups within the country. They have established a remarkable civil administration in the large areas they control. Compared to them, the forces of General Mihailovich are insignificant.

November 26, 1943

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THE YUGOSLAV PARTISAN MOVEMENT

Although informed quarters have for well over a year recognized that the Partisans form the only effective force resisting the Axis in Yugoslavia, although many Partisan exploits have been reliably reported, and although the name of Tito has recently become familiar to all readers of the press, accurate and detailed intelligence regarding Partisan organization and activities has not been available. The Yugoslav Government in Exile, a clique of discredited politicians associated with previous dictatorial and Pan Serb regimes, has taken much trouble to keep such information from the interested agencies of the American and British Governments, and has conducted a campaign,-- still in full progress -- to belittle and blacken the Partisans and to claim for General Mihailovich credit for all successes against the Germans. It has, however, proved impossible for the Government entirely to obscure the truth: Mihailovich has preferred not to fight the Germans, he accepted arms from the Italians while they were still enemies of the Allies, he has permitted his forces to dwindle until they have become insignificantly small from a military point of view, and he has taken his Serbian Chetnik forces into a bitter civil war with the Yugoslav Army of National Liberation, known as the Partisans. By condemning the Partisans as Communists the Government in Exile has appealed to the social prejudices of the British and American public; by condemning them as Croat Ustashi they have appealed to the anti-Croatian sentiments of Serbs in Yugoslavia and abroad. The untruth of much of this propaganda has been vaguely appreciated, but many of the misconceptions which they have spread about

the Yugoslav resistance movement in general and about the Partisans in particular have remained unchallenged in the absence of eyewitness accounts from within the country itself.

Recently, Daniel DeLuce, Associated Press correspondent, sent a remarkable series of despatches widely published in America describing what he had seen at a Partisan Brigade Headquarters. These stories helped answer some of the open questions about the Partisan movement; but it is now known that DeLuce got no further into the country than Livno, and his opportunities for observation were of course limited. The material in the report which follows is obtained from an eyewitness source of unimpeachable reliability. Perhaps the most startling piece of information not hitherto known is the revelation that the movement is not, as had been thought, chiefly Croatian and Slovenian, but about 60 per cent Serb. It is also now known that the Soviet Government never has sent the Partisans any representative or any military supplies.

I. The Army of Liberation as a Military Force

The Partisan movement began in the summer of 1941 with a few scattered groups of guerrillas, known as Odredin. Following regular guerrilla tactics, they attacked Italians and Germans wherever they could, and tried to avoid being placed on the defensive. Ignoring savage reprisals, they neither gave nor asked quarter. They depended on captured arms, and increased their numbers after scoring their first successes. Over the past two years, the Axis has conducted five major offensives against them, of which the most formidable was the campaign in Montenegro during the

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summer of 1943. Seven German, and four Italian divisions with artillery and planes, plus Bulgarian, Ustashi, and Mihailovich auxiliary troops, almost succeeded in encircling and destroying 8,000 Partisans under Tito himself. This force broke through to the North, and by a brilliant operation, got to the Vrbas valley, where they established themselves in a series of important towns. The withdrawal of Italy from the war increased Partisan arms, numbers, and confidence. At the end of September 1943, the Partisans took Split, capturing a large amount of Italian equipment, and adding 9,000 new Yugoslav recruits to their ranks, as well as a sizable number of Italians. They hoped for, but failed to get, Allied air support in the form of attacks on the garrison towns which are the keys to the German system of communications along the coast, the plan being to establish themselves on the coast and to secure their communications inland. When the Allies failed also to deliver to Split supplies needed by the Partisans they were forced to evacuate the port under attack by dive bombers, but took with them into the interior much heavy equipment, and many thousands of gallons of gasoline.

The National Army of Liberation is no longer merely a group of scattered guerrilla units. It is an army of 26 divisions and about 220,000 men. It now completely controls large areas of the country. The Germans occupy only the more important towns, and are forced to expend large forces keeping the main roads open. Even along these roads, the Partisans can move freely at night; it is perfectly possible to travel from the Albanian to the Hungarian frontier, and from the Dalmatian coast to Belgrade, remaining the whole time in Partisan territory and never seeing a German. The Partisans now control the entire Adriatic

coast except the principal seaports -- Zara, Sibenik, Split, Makarska, and Kotor. They also still control many of the islands, although they have recently lost some of these.

The Army is organized by brigade, division, and corps. Each of these units has a well-organized staff, exercising complete control over the unit under its command, and all subordinate to the General Staff. Because these forces are widely scattered (approximately 50,000 in Bosnia, 15,000 in the Sanjak, 20,000 in Croatia, 10,000 in Slavonia, 60,000 in Slovenia and Istria, 25,000 in Dalmatia, 10,000 in the Voyvodina, and 30,000 in Serbia and Macedonia), the local commanders are sometimes allowed to interpret in detail the general lines of policy laid down from above. The figure 220,000 is as of 6 November, 1943. It undoubtedly includes three recently formed divisions, about which not much is known. There are some non-divisional troops -- chiefly garrison troops and detachments guarding lines of communication. Despite difficulties in communication, however, the central control is entirely effective. Headquarters communicates with the outlying forces by radio or by courier. The Army's services of supply are well organized; and the distribution of captured material efficient and rapid. Trucks and a few small tanks and armored cars taken from the Italians have improved the Partisans' position as to equipment, but their needs are still great.

Despite their growth into a formidable and well-organized striking force, the Partisans are still not in a position to risk pitched battle with the Germans. Their strategy calls for attacks on the Germans at unexpected times and places. Although they have scored great successes in knocking out enemy lines of communication, this is by no means their only

form of activity. They occupy and exploit the resources of towns and large areas of country; but they are always ready to abandon a given locality in the face of frontal attack. In this way they give the Germans no target for a decisive counterstroke. The more arms and other supplies -- food, clothing, medical supplies, transport, etc. -- the Allies can send them by sea and air, the more difficulties they can make for the fourteen Reichswehr divisions at present in Yugoslavia. In any case, if informed of Allied military intentions, they will cooperate in any way possible. When it is noted that Mihailovich now has only 10,000 - 15,000 men, and when his treachery is remembered, it becomes clear on military grounds alone that the Partisans are the Yugoslav force for the Allies to reckon with.

II. The Army of National Liberation as a Political Force

Tito, the Commander in Chief of the Army, is still a somewhat mysterious figure. It is not even certain that he is the original Tito at all. He is, however, believed to be Josip Brozovich (or Broz) a former Zagreb metal worker, who has been a Communist agent ever since the end of the last war, and who is thought to have been sent back into Yugoslavia by the Comintern in 1937 to take over the direction of the Yugoslav Communist Party, then underground and illegal. In spite of assertions that he fought in Spain, it is now believed that he had no previous military experience. In any case he has directed military operations from the first. He continues to dominate the political scene as well, although he holds no political office except that of leader of the Yugoslav Communist Party. He is reported to be in his late forties, with

grey hair and clean shaven. The photograph of him published by Louis Adamic in this country is said to be genuine. He is intelligent, determined, and firm in his views, reasonable, humorous, and astute in both political and military matters. It is hard to assess his personal responsibility for the impressive administrative and military structure he has built, but, although his ability and that of some of his followers has naturally been a significant factor, the general spirit of confidence and enthusiasm in the Partisan armies seems to spring from a deep popular feeling in contemporary Yugoslavia that at last an opportunity has arrived for the people to free their country and to build a hopeful future.

Within the area controlled by them, the Partisans have established a remarkable political system. Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Muslims and Christians, Roman Catholics and Orthodox, Communists and non-Communists, men and women alike are entirely free to express their political opinions, and to make suggestions for the conduct of political affairs. Immediately upon the occupation of a town, the Partisan leaders call a town meeting, which all inhabitants are asked to attend. Partisan spokesmen then explain their intention of liberating Yugoslavia completely from the Germans, and from every form of political, social, and religious oppression. On the "platform" at the meeting they have representatives of the many religious, national, and political groups who go to make up their government. One by one, these representatives, usually including a Roman Catholic priest, a Muslim, a Serb, a Croat Peasant Party member, a Slovene, a woman, and a Communist address the audience, explaining that they are all joined together in a movement to establish a united and free Yugoslavia,

where all national groups will have at least limited political autonomy, and all religious groups will be tolerated alike, where women will no longer be treated like cattle, but will be self-respecting members of the community, and entitled to a share in making its decisions. The townspeople respond enthusiastically; their young men, if any, join the armies of the Partisans; they hold an election of town officials to take emergency charge of the town's vital services; and they are given the right to change these officials if they prove unsatisfactory.

The town or village chooses by universal suffrage an Odbor or Committee, corresponding to the Russian Soviet. This Odbor is the lowest administrative unit. Its members choose from among themselves representatives to the district (Srez) Odbors, who in turn choose members for regional and area Odbors. From these Odbors the chain of command goes up through the Committees of the various nationalities (e.g. The Croat Anti-fascist Committee of National Liberation, called Zavnoh), to Avnoj, the Yugoslav Anti-fascist Committee of National Liberation. Of this, the supreme civic authority, Dr. Ivan Ribar is President. He was at one time speaker of the Yugoslav Parliament. The Government in Exile has at various times maintained that the political chief of the Partisan movement was actually Ribar's son, a known Communist; but this is now known not to be true. In theory, Ribar is theoretically extremely influential in the Partisan movement, but he is in fact overshadowed by Tito. Between this elaborate political structure, which is clearly modeled on that of the USSR, and the Army itself, liaison work is carried on by political commissars, also of course copied from the Russians. They participate

actively in the fighting, and are reported to be an exceptionally able group of men.

The Communist party plays an important role in the Partisan system, and many of the key figures both in military and political positions are Communists. It should be remembered, however, that the enormous preponderance of the rank and file is not Communist, but literally anything from clerical to agrarian democrat. The party's chief function initially was to supply the underground organization whereby the isolated groups could communicate with each other. Having been an underground organization in the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, the party was able to furnish experienced underground organizers. Some of its leaders had fought in Spain, and understood the art of keeping an underequipped force in being when opposed by an enemy with tanks and planes. It was impossible in Yugoslavia for a movement purely Communist in character to achieve any degree of success, and so able a group as the Partisan leaders well understood this. They have therefore welcomed all comers to the ranks, and have now a substantial number of ex-fascist supporters of Pavelich, and of Serb Chetniks from Mihailovich's armies, including some high-ranking officers from the former Yugoslav army who were displeased with his policy of inaction. Thus, the only qualification for membership in the movement is willingness to fight the Germans.

The Partisan leadership has never made many of the mistakes made by the Russian Bolsheviks. There is no trace, for example, of atheism in their program: in fact, they have restored and reopened many orthodox churches destroyed by the fanatic Ustashi in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and

have attracted many thousands of Roman Catholic and Orthodox priests as well as Muslim Imams. They have a well organized system of Army chaplains, and have no religious bias except against all forms of intolerance. Moreover, they have not engaged in class warfare. Many of their highest leaders come from conservative and well-to-do Serb and Croat families; and there is also an ever-growing group of intellectuals, including many from Belgrade, among whom is Ribnikar, conservative former editor of the leading Belgrade newspaper, Politika. There is no looting or violence against the civilian population: this is a crime punishable by death; thus, there has never been any question of the forcible redistribution of property, or of interference with private enterprise. Alone among the many groups fighting in Yugoslavia, the Partisans have committed no atrocities, nor have they ever felt it necessary to order mass arrests and transfers of populations.

Other political parties and institutions continue their independent existence within the Partisan ranks. The most striking example of this is the case of the Croat Peasant Party, a traditionally democratic and agrarian group, whose efforts under the leadership of Radich and Machek were, however, chiefly devoted to nationalism, -- the obtaining within the Kingdom of Yugoslavia of limited autonomy for Croatia. Since the German invasion Machek has refused to engage in politics; and, while unwilling to sanction Pavelich's Ustashi regime, he has ordered his followers not to resist. The result has been that a large number of conservative and nationalist members have collaborated with the Ustashi, while the more agrarian and democratic members have gone over to the Partisans in defiance of Machek's orders. Machek himself is hated by

the Partisans, but these former followers of his have not only been welcomed by them, but even publish their own newspaper, Slobodni Dom, (Free Homeland), edited by Magovats, who was formerly the editor of the Peasant Party organ, Dom. Several of the former Slovene parties too continue their existence within the Partisan ranks.

In addition to this religious and political inclusiveness, Partisan economic and social policy is surprisingly constructive, and has inaugurated in a country actually under enemy occupation and suffering grievous hardships a number of progressive and desirable new institutions. Newspapers are being produced, youth groups formed, women's institutes established, and efforts made to combat illiteracy. Factories, power stations, and railways in the liberated areas are restored to use with great speed.

The predominantly Communist leadership of a predominantly non-Communist organization nearly a quarter of a million strong has adopted a political program for the future of Yugoslavia on which all Yugoslavs not compromised by collaborationism, or determined to restore the old authoritarian system, can cheerfully agree. Tito himself believes that the Partisan movement owes its success in no small measure to the fact that it opposes not only the German invader but the restoration of the old regime, with its tradition of Serb dominance over the other nationalities, of oppression, and of the abrogation of elementary civil liberties such as a free press and a free and secret ballot. He envisages a federal Yugoslavia with all nationalities enjoying equal rights, and all under a central government which would discourage separatist tendencies. To those who express their skepticism as to the possibility that this could ever be accomplished, Tito points out the extraordinary harmony of the diverse nationalities and religions

under his present command. The Partisan forces at present actually are about sixty per cent Serb, contrary to all the statements of Mihailovich and of the Government in Exile. Bosnia and Herzegovina, where the Partisans are strongest, are largely Serb areas; many from Croatia, Dalmatia, Montenegro, and even Old Serbia have also joined the ranks.

There is thus in the minds of the Partisan leaders no possibility of a return to the old order. The Government in Exile is generally known as the Government of Traitors and Deserters, and is hated as much as Pavelich, Nedich (the Serb Quisling), Machek, and Mihailovich, who treacherously attacked the Partisans twice in 1941, when they were trying to negotiate with him for a union of all anti-Axis forces. One of the points at issue between the two groups at this early period was the question of the demotion by Mihailovich to their former low ranks of army officers who had proved themselves with the Partisans, and had been promoted by them. Mihailovich was adamant on this, and, while discussions were still going on, he ordered an attack on the Partisan forces, whom his men surprised. The Chetniks murdered Partisan wounded and medical personnel wholesale, thus convincing the Partisans that no compromise with Mihailovich would ever be possible. Overwhelmingly conclusive evidence has since piled up of his having collaborated with the Axis; one of his Commanders, Djuich, for example, who commands about 3,000 men, or one quarter of the entire forces at Mihailovich's disposal, actually celebrated in the local Italian field headquarters the award of the Karageorge Cross made him over the BBC by the Government in Exile on the recommendation of Mihailovich. The Government's continued sponsorship of Mihailovich has made it anathema to the Partisans, who have also

naturally regarded with contempt the constant admonitions from its radio speakers that now was not the time to fight.

The King's public support of Mihailovich has offended the Partisans deeply. They feel that a return of the dynasty would probably mean a return of its hangers-on, the members of the old Greater Serbia clique, who have been in power since the foundation of the Kingdom. Moreover, even those Partisans who do not think in such political terms, find it hard to forgive the King for having left the country. Peasants all, they remember the peasant bravery of his grandfather, Peter I, in the first World War when he was carried on a litter, an aged but indomitable figure, along with his troops retreating in agony through the Albanian mountains. When Peter II is referred to, the Partisan soldier is apt to shake his head and say sadly, with bewilderment, but with some degree of finality: "He deserted us." Partisan propaganda, however, has never attacked the king. It is clear that they do not wish this question raised now, but would prefer to permit the people of Yugoslavia to settle it in their own way after the war.

The international portion of the Partisans' post-war program would also appear unexceptionable to most democratically-minded (and that means most) Yugoslavs. They seek no territory beyond their pre-war frontiers, except the Slovene and Croat lands awarded to Italy after the last war, which all Yugoslavs except a few pro-Italian Serbs of the Pashich type also desire united to Yugoslavia. They want a Balkan understanding with all their Balkan neighbors including the Bulgarians and Hungarians.

The Partisans have the warmest possible affection for Soviet Russia. The South Slav peasant has always been pro-Russian, no matter what the color of the Russian regime; and the depth of this Pan Slav sympathy, which can hardly be exaggerated, is undoubtedly a major factor in their international orientation. Beyond this, however, the great victories of the Russians over the Germans were for a long time the only comfort visible on the horizon for the Partisans as for the rest of the world. To them it is a matter of deep personal pride that it was their Slav brothers who stopped the Germans and saved the world from the flood of Fascism. The Russian victories have fortified the natural Yugoslav predisposition to admire Russia. Finally, the leading role played by individual Communists like Tito in the movement has of course tended to make the movement adopt the symbols and phraseology of Stalin's Russia. The Partisans wear red stars on their caps; they paint hammer and sickle insignia on the walls of their headquarters; to a man (including the priests) they give the clenched fist salute; Stalin's picture is everywhere to be seen along with Tito's. All this adoption of external symbolism, however, should not be allowed to obscure the fact that there can be only an infinitesimal proportion of Marxist doctrinaire Communists in the Partisan ranks, simply because the breed has never existed in Yugoslavia. There is no reason to believe that the political practices and political program outlined above are not the genuine practices and program of the Partisans; or to suspect that behind a front apparently democratic and liberal someone is preparing a Revolution on the Russian model. There is nobody to revolt against (unless the Exile Government returns), and nobody to revolt: Yugoslavia has neither landless peasantry nor an exploited urban proletariat;

when the Germans have been thrown out, it will be easy for a country of small peasant proprietors to institute peacefully and without bloodshed the kind of agrarian democracy which the Partisans apparently have in mind, -- a democracy politically based on autonomy for the nationalities, economically based upon peasant cooperatives, and internationally oriented toward friendship with the other Balkan states and with Russia.

The Russians, in spite of rumors to the contrary, have never given the Partisans any material support, and in fact have never even sent a Russian representative to serve with them or to give them military advice, -- which indeed they seem not to have needed. The only support received from Russia has been moral: the Soviet press and radio have praised the Partisans as good anti-fascist soldiers, and have denounced Mihailovich as a traitor and a collaborator. At Pan Slav Congresses the Partisans have been sent greetings. None of this has proved much concrete help against the Germans.

The Partisans are also strongly pro-American and pro-British; but these sentiments are weakening in the face of continued allied support to the Government in Exile. To the Partisans it looks as though London and Washington were acting in bad faith when they profess their desire to bring about the end of Fascism, and then support a Cabinet of which Mihailovich is a member. The BBC broadcasts extolling Mihailovich as a hero, which have only recently been abandoned, were extraordinarily galling, while American broadcasts have been no better. The gift of four bombers by President Roosevelt to the Yugoslav Government and its army aroused Tito's resentment to such a degree that he delivered himself of as formal

a protest as his facilities permitted: he broadcast a complaint, and set the President straight as to who was doing the fighting in Yugoslavia. Of course the main reason for hard feeling is the lack of support. The attack on Split was delivered with the full expectation that Allied material and air support would be forthcoming: when it was not, and the Partisans had to abandon the city, losing a thousand men in the process, they naturally felt some bitterness. All these growing suspicions, however, would almost surely disappear at the first sign that material aid on a substantial scale was forthcoming.